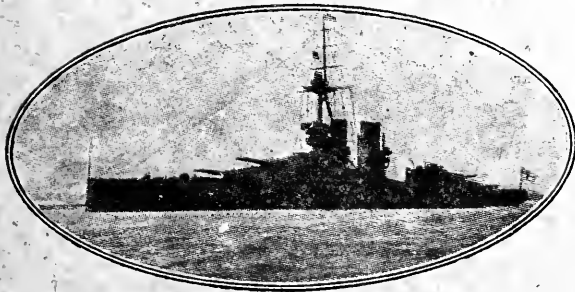


9-11-15

IF THE BRITISH FLEET HAD NOT MOVED!

BY

ARCHIBALD HURD.



LONDON
DARLING & SON, LIMITED.

1915.

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(Printed in the "New York Herald" of November 7th, 1915.)

There is no better way of concealing the truth than to use trite phrases which have passed into our everyday speech. They are so familiar that they make little impression on the mind; no one pauses to think what they mean. We can trace their atrophying process in religion, natural science, and politics. Just now in all the Allied countries there is talk of "the command of the sea." Who stops to consider what the words mean? Who ever calculates what the cost in human life and treasure would have been had the Allies not had "command of the sea." Who, again, ever examines the facts to ascertain exactly why the Allies possess this advantage?

What course, for instance, would the war have taken if the British Fleet had stood by, had not intervened in the struggle? The naval situation at the moment when Germany determined to trample on Europe's freedom was not a little remarkable. By means of successive naval acts, Germany had first overtaken Russia, then Italy, and, finally, France, and she could count on the support of the Austro-Hungarian Navy, which under her guidance had greatly expanded until it rivalled that of Italy. The Germans had so completely out-distanced all the other Continental Powers of Europe in ships of war that, on the outbreak of hostilities, they, with the co-operation of Austria-Hungary, were absolutely assured of the command of the sea, if the British Fleet did not move. The two enemies had an enormous preponderance in effective ships of all classes over France and Russia, and those ships, every seaman admitted, would be handled with enterprise and skill. The relation of the four navies is not generally appreciated. The following statement, showing the ships of the four countries on the outbreak of war, reveals the preponderance possessed by the Central Powers:—

	Germany.	Austria.	Total.	France.	Russia.	Total.
Dreadnoughts—						
Battleships ...	16	3	19	4	—	4
Battle-cruisers ...	5	—	5	—	—	—
Pre-Dreadnoughts—						
Battleships ...	20	12	32	19	8	27
Armoured Cruisers	9	3	12	19	6	25
Cruisers ...	48	10	58	13	9	22
Destroyers ...	130	15	145	84	95	179
Torpedo-boats ...	80	58	138	150	25	175
Submarines ...	30	6	36	53	25	78

Sea command is still exercised by armoured ships and cruisers. In the first line of battle, the Dreadnought class, the odds were 24 to 4 at the outbreak of war. In the second, 32 to 27, but of the Russian ships several were shut up in the Baltic. In armoured cruisers, the strength of France and Russia—the ships being mainly obsolescent—was more apparent on paper than real, and in scouting ships the Central Powers had no mean advantage. Even if Italy had joined the Powers of the Dual Alliance, Germany and Austria-Hungary, with strategical advantages of no mean value, would have possessed a sufficient margin against their opponents.

There would have been no blockade of the North Sea. “What of that?” it may be said. Well, it would have meant that the Germans could, with slight risk, have transported troops to any point on the French coast. The value of superior sea power in amphibious warfare is the element of strategic surprise which it confers on its possessor. A German army might have been secretly concentrated at Hamburg or Emden on a Saturday, and early in the following week might have been landed on some portion of the French coast, taking the French Army in the rear or flank. The advantage of the Germans would have laid in the ignorance—unavoidable ignorance—of the French authorities of the spot chosen for disembarkation. The French Fleet would have been tied in the Mediterranean by the menace of Austria-Hungary; and the German Navy would have had no difficulty, owing not to superior seamanship but to superior numbers, in seizing the command of the North Sea and English Channel. The sea in itself is no defence to a country like France, but a menace in the absence of naval protection, for armies can be moved in these circumstances more easily by water than by land.

Would it have been a matter of no consequence if the Germans had had this power of strategic surprise in their hands. There is good reason to believe that they had laid their plans for the invasion of France from the sea. It is reported that they had transports ready, as well as the troops to put in them, on the assumption that the British people, secure in their island, would conclude that the war was none of their business.

But that is not all. The Germans would not only have obtained this overwhelming military advantage, but would have been able to shut off all French oversea commerce. Think what that would have meant! No merchant ships throughout the duration of the war would have been able to enter or leave French ports without running the gauntlet of the enemy’s patrols—cruisers, destroyers, and submarines.

Nor, again, is that all. France and Russia had no men-of-war of great fighting weight in the outer seas; the Germans were represented by some of their most powerful and swift cruisers. What would have been the fate of the mercantile marine of France? These merchant vessels represented in value many kings’ ransoms. About 16,000 sailing ships and 2,000 steamships would have been in danger, together with their cargoes. What

the fate of many of them would have been may be judged from the exploits of the " Emden," " Königsburg," and other enemy cruisers before they were destroyed. Russia's merchant ships would have shared the same misfortune.

For the period of the war—how long would it have lasted? Russia and France would have been, to all intents, and purposes, besieged. Neither country would have been able to use the sea for any purpose. That condition would have reacted on their military and economic power. They would have been in a position to bring in no food, raw materials, or munitions. The Germans, and not the countries of the Dual Alliance, would have had the run of the neutral markets of the world for munitions, men, and money. On the American continent alone there were—and are—about 20,000,000 Germans and Austrians, who could have supplied not only men to reinforce the Armies of the Central Powers in Europe, but men to make munitions and other men of great financial and industrial experience—some of them millionaires—to assist Germany in getting gold, raw materials for all purposes, and even luxuries. Life behind the lines of the German Armies would have continued much as under peace conditions. The population of the German Empire were eager for war because they believed that even if Italy joined Russia and France, they could count on using all the seas to their advantage, drawing from them everything they required.

Were their calculations ill-founded? In one particular they were. They assumed with confidence that the British Fleet would take no part in the war. They were wrong. That one error of judgment made all the difference: it is more than probable that it cost the Germans the victory they believed in the last days of July, 1914, to be within their grasp. Why? *When the war broke out the relative strength of the British Navy was almost in the proportion of two to one in comparison with that of Germany.* Think what that meant. All the conditions at sea were instantly reversed. German hopes were doomed when the German anticipations as to the use which would be made of the British Navy proved unfounded.

Why do the Germans hate the British people more than French or Russians? It is not because of the wealth of England, or her trade, or her colonies, or her shipping, or her armies of 3,000,000 men—it is because the British Fleet so decisively turned the scale that from the date of the British ultimatum the £300,000,000, which the enemy had spent on naval expansion, became profitless. Germany realised, as in a flash, that owing to the majesty of the greatest sea power, she could not obtain the rich dividends from her naval expenditure on which she had counted with complete confidence. In those fateful days of July, 1914, German Ministers argued with the diplomatists of England: " This is not your quarrel; you are not a Continental Power; leave us to settle matters between ourselves on our side of the North Sea and English Channel, and you stand aside and you will be safe—in fact, you will be able to make huge profits out of the war." .

The Germans were, in a sense right; it was not England's quarrel as far as material things went, and England was protected by her Fleet, which for a thousand years had prevented any invader landing on her shores. But, nevertheless, England threw down the gage not in defence of her material interests; not in the hope of gaining territory; not in the belief that any indemnity could be extracted which would pay the cost of her warlike operations. She intervened not merely to avenge Belgium and to defend France, but to defend civilisation; and she has since had reason to appreciate that, in defending civilisation, she has been defending all she holds most dear. But in the early days of the war when the British Fleet was mobilised and took up its war stations, this truth was not realised as it is realised to-day, because we did not then know the real heart of Germany. With the intervention of the British Fleet Germany's confident assurance of victory was undermined.

The predominant influence on the history of the world has been not the soldier but the sailor. A Frenchman once saw that it was the ships of Nelson which won the battle of Waterloo. England has never possessed a great army; nor has the United States. When the German Emperor read the books of the American seaman, Admiral Mahan, he determined that he must have a great fleet, because from the days of Xerxes and Themistocles navies have decided the fate of empires. It might be said that all the decisive battles of the world have been fought on the seas. That would seem a bold statement, but it is a clear approximation to the truth. Without sea power, land power—that is, soldiers—must be imprisoned, and, in modern economic conditions, may well be reduced to starvation—starvation for want of shells as well as food.

In the present war, the two-to-one British Fleet, with the co-operation of the much weaker but splendidly manned navies of France, Italy and Russia, wrested victory from Germany because it divorced her from the sea. The great English sailor and statesman, Sir Walter Raleigh, once declared that "whosoever commands the sea commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and, consequently, the world itself." The German Emperor believed profoundly in that statement as one of the greatest of political and economic truths. Owing to the British Fleet, he has learnt that the converse is true: Germany commands nothing but an army which, because it is cut off from the sea, must be defeated. He has seen the ships of his merchant navy, second only in size to England's merchant marine, either destroyed or compelled to fly to neutral ports; he has seen German commerce strangled, representing an enormous loss; he has seen almost all his colonies wrested from him. Since the war began, owing to victorious sea power, Germany has been bleeding to death; she has been able to secure no remedies to relieve her condition. She is like a gourmand shut up in an island prison in sight of a profusion of his favourite foods. Germany, with a fleet inferior only to that of England among the navies of the world, is imprisoned by British sea power.

while, in southern waters, the naval forces of France and Italy, with the assistance of England, have reduced Austria-Hungary and Turkey to the same condition. The Allies are using the seas—which provide military and economic strength—almost as though they were not confronted by two of the most considerable fleets of the world. They, and not the Germans, as the history of the war has revealed, possess the power to land soldiers when and where they like. They and not the Germans are able to enter the great neutral markets. They and not the Germans can send their merchant ships where they will. And of the sea power which is the foundation of the confidence of the Allies in victory, England has contributed just that overwhelming margin of safety which has rendered the fifteen years of German naval expansion, with all its grandiose ambitions, a mere waste of £300,000,000.

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